



March 21, 2011

Katherine Hart
Chair, Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board
11020 Sun Center Drive, #200
Rancho Cordova, CA 95670

Re: Recommended Irrigated Lands Regulatory Framework: Groundwater

Dear Chairperson Hart and Board Members,

We write to encourage the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board to fully utilize its regulatory authority to protect ground water in the Central Valley from contamination by irrigated agriculture.

In a time of climate change, when we will all have to rely even more heavily on ground water resources, it is hard to overstate the urgency of stopping continued pollution of our shared water resources.

An unconscionable number of Central Valley households, many of whose families have lived in their homes for generations, can no longer drink the water from their private wells or small community water systems due to pollution caused, in large measure, by irrigated agriculture. These families and communities are not responsible for contaminating their water supply; however, they are paying the cost with their health, the devaluation of their homes and the expense of paying for water twice.

Farming is a valuable part of California's economy, history and heritage. However, when the waste products of one industry hurt the health and finances of innocent bystanders, cripple investment in their communities and harm the environmental resources upon which we, and our grandchildren's children, depend, we not only degrade our water resources, we degrade the fabric of trust and mutual respect in our region. Externalized pollution pits one economic sector against another; it pits the older generations against

those yet to be born. To allow such pollution to continue is to commit both an environmental and an intergenerational injustice.

The UU Legislative Ministry engages Unitarian Universalists in California in collaborative justice ministries on behalf of our values of justice, equity, compassion and respect for the interdependent web of existence. Our membership of 5500 includes both those from our congregations in the Central Valley and those from across California who consume the produce grown in this region. Our national partner, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, is membership human rights and social justice organization of 37,000 members that support water justice at the local, state, national and international level.

While no one is excited to pay more for groceries, as consumers we realize that we must bear the cost of what it actually takes to grow our food in a manner that respects the health of our water ways, our communities and those who labor in the fields. Those of us who seek to live an ethical life are better served when the price signals of the market communicate the actual cost of what we are buying and when there is more transparency as to the actual practices being utilized by growers to produce our food.

We support transparency that allows consumers to better support agricultural practices in keeping with their values and health priorities, and believe that the suggestion by environmental groups that growers publically report their fertilizer application is a good one. Not only will this help the board prioritize which farms to inspect, and provide important data to guide our efforts to reduce nitrate pollution in all soil types, such transparency could help consumers to support the move to more environmentally sustainable agricultural practices.

Cooperative efforts among growers to support mutual education and better management practices are to be commended; however, regulation, with measurable outcomes, timelines and enforcement are necessary to provide the structure and clarity that an industry needs to make the necessary investments to move to the next level of safety and accountability.

Implementing strong agricultural regulations will help to assure that responsible growers will not be at a competitive disadvantage with those who take less care to avoid polluting our water.

The healing of wounds in the fabric of community is promoted when those who are responsible do their part to care for those who have been harmed. We do feel it is appropriate to include the establishment of a cleanup and abatement fund to help those communities who need clean drinking water.

Unitarian Universalists are active in efforts to realize the human right to water. In early March we were privileged to accompany the United Nations Independent Expert on the

human right to water and sanitation during her mission to the United States. Her visit included time in the Central Valley. At the end of her mission on March 4th, she gave an initial report to the U.S. Department of State and the public:

“The U.S. has made important strides in eliminating many forms of discrimination. It must, however, do more to ensure that not only de jure but also de facto discrimination is eliminated regarding access to water and sanitation.... Problems of discrimination in U.S. water and sanitation services may intensify in the coming years with climate change and competing demands for ever scarce water resources. Ensuring the right to water and sanitation for all requires a paradigm shift – new designs and approaches that promote human rights, that are affordable and that create more value in terms of public health improvements, community development, and global ecosystem protection. A holistic, systems approach is required, whereby the water sector is not viewed in isolation from the agricultural, chemical, industrial and energy sectors. Accordingly, a stronger regulatory system should be put in place to prevent pollution of surface water and groundwater, and to ensure affordability.”

Protecting drinking water from agricultural run-off is part of realizing the human right to water. Your decisions with regard to the regulation of irrigated agriculture will be felt throughout California and beyond. We thank the staff for their hard work and ask that the board support timely implementation of enforceable regulations. Everyone has the right to affordable access to safe water; let's help to make that right a reality for people in the Central Valley.

Sincerely,

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